

no Ramsay House either."²⁷ [Illustration #5]



Illustration #5--Presentation rendering of a restored Ramsay House by Milton L. Grigg, 1950. Source: Washington Evening Star

In April 1950 the Historical Society optimistically announced to the City Council that they had pooled resources with the Alexandria Association and had \$9,000 on hand with which to begin restoration work which they said would start by May. The plan, announced by J. Hamilton Seeley, was to begin work on the exterior restoration while "civic organizations" would each be given one room on the interior to "restore." However, there was a yet another problem. Ramsay House was located in the central business fire district which mandated that exterior building materials had to be fireproof. Because the restoration plan called for wood siding, an exception to the fire district regulations was needed before the work could be undertaken. In response to the Society's appeal, City Council, in time honored fashion, appointed a committee to study the matter.²⁸

May came and went, so did the summer, and still nothing happened. The deadline for commencement of actual physical work that had been established by Council was September 1, 1950. By the middle of the month, when it became clear that no restoration work was about to begin, the frustration about the lack of

²⁷ Phil Warren, "Ramsey [sic.] House Decays as Citizens Wait for Steps on Renovation", AG, 10/21/1949, p.1.

²⁸ "Ramsey [sic.] House Project Okayed", AG, 4/12/1950, p.1.

progress in restoring the building reached critical levels. One citizen activist wrote a letter to the Mayor and Council calling for the immediate demolition of Ramsay House and its replacement with surface parking. He chided Council on their lack of backbone in enforcing its own requirements. He wrote that if Ramsay House were "owned by a private individual [it] would have long since been condemned and the owners compelled to tear it down. The Council, being rather sentimental, has from time-to-time acquiesced in the requests of a minority group who are desirous of retaining historical land-marks for posterity, at the expense of the tax payers even if by so doing, it hinders progress and expansion of the City."

At the same time, Council also received an offer from an individual who owned land just across the Potomac River in Maryland to move the house there and restore it at his own expense. He claimed that he had talked with both Rebecca Ramsay Reese and Clyde C. Lamond, two of the staunchest champions of the restoration of the building, and both had expressed no opposition. He said, in fact, that Mrs. Reese saw the plan as a lesser of evils, for as he wrote, "rather than let the house fall into complete ruins it would be better to let someone have the house who would restore it nearby, and thus the house would not be lost forever." Councilman Bragg, who was a member of the Committee appointed by Council to work with the Historical Society, and the Alexandria Association indicated that the groups had apparently given up on the project and had simply failed to inform Council of the fact. Council took both requests under advisement, but indicated that they would give the groups only one more week to show progress or the demolition would be permitted. Alarmed, the *Gazette* published a front page article with the headline: "Removal of Ramsay House is Imminent."²⁹

At the end of the one-week reprieve, it was announced that the National Lumberman's Association was interested in helping fund the restoration, ostensibly because it had much of its original lumber "intact." This trade association was apparently spurred to action by a local resident who was the editor of the *Wood Industries Weekly* and had written several articles in the trade publication about the fate of the Ramsay House.³⁰ Based upon this latest hope, Council once again extended the deadline for beginning the restoration work to early October.

These new threats once again galvanized the Historical Society and the Alexandria Association into action. By the time the deadline approached, finger

²⁹ Lesley B. Mayer to Mayor and City Council, August 28, 1950. Clerk of City Council files; See also, "L.B. Mayer Submits Letter to Council on Ramsay House", *AG*, 9/20/1950, p.2; Donald D. Donohue to Councilman W. Albert Smoot, September 15, 1950, Clerk of City Council files; "Removal of Ramsay House is Imminent", *AG*, 9/20/1950, p.1.

³⁰ "Wood Surviving 2 ½ Centuries", *Wood Industries Weekly*, 1/31/1948, pp.5-6.

pointing at who was to blame for the lack of progress began. At the first fall meeting of the Alexandria Association on October 9, 1950, the Association placed the blame on the Alexandria Historical Society and Milton Grigg, the project's restoration architect. The Association charged that the Historical Society had a "do nothing policy" with respect to the house. Several members were quoted as saying that Grigg had apparently "lost interest in the project after having made an enthusiastic start several years ago." One member, William D. Sisson, was quoted as saying that all Grigg had ever shown the Association's property committee was "a pretty water color painting of the Ramsay House."³¹ Grigg was incensed by the criticism at the Association's meeting and by the ensuing newspaper coverage. [Illustration #'s 6 & 7]

The next day the new president of the Association, Frederick Ford, called Grigg to acknowledge what had happened at the meeting. The following day Grigg fired off a letter to Ford outlining his grievances against the Association and laying out in some detail the reasons that work had not yet commenced on the building. First and foremost, Grigg rightly noted that the Association had no official role in the restoration of the building, which was solely the responsibility of the Historical Society, and thus, he had no formal responsibility to keep the Association informed of progress or lack thereof on the project. He went on to note that he had completed working drawings for the restoration of building in 1947 and that he had gone so far as to also prepare working drawings for the reconstruction of the building if restoration was not deemed feasible. He emphasized that the reconstruction drawings had been done on his own initiative and noted that he was the one responsible for securing the services of the Simpson Brothers as the general contractor for the project. He went on to describe several technical points that had not been resolved in order to allow the project to begin. He concluded that the Association had to take some action to set the record straight regarding his involvement with the project.³²

As a means of sparking the project, the Association appointed a special three person committee to expedite fundraising for the project and to act as a liaison with the Historical Society. William H.S. Stevens was named chairman, and Rebecca Ramsay Reese was appointed as a member along with the Association's president Frederick Ford.³³

³¹ Dorothy H. Kabler, "Ramsay House Removal Attacked", AG, 10/10/1950, p.1.

³² Grigg to Frederick Ford, 10/11/1950. Alexandria Association MMS Collection, Special Collections, Alexandria Library.

³³ "Demolition of Ramsay House is Held Up", AG, 9/27/1950, p.1; "Readers Write", Letter of Floyd B. Quigg to Gazette, AG, 10/7/1950, p.2; and Kabler, "Ramsay House Removal Attacked", AG, 10/10/1950, p.1. Stevens was a well known preservationist who lived in the eighteenth century house at 312 Queen Street.

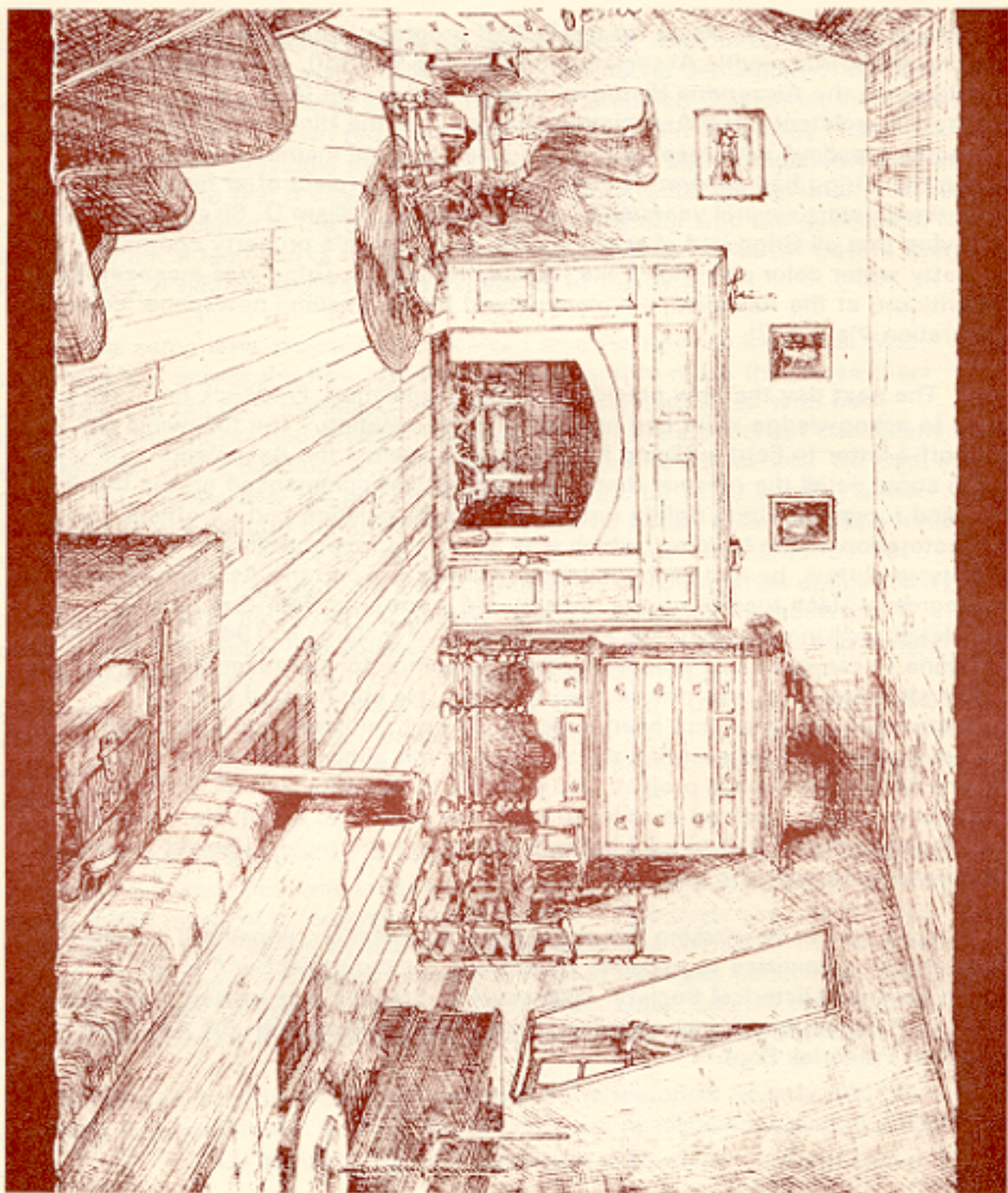


Illustration #6 & 7—Two conjectural drawings of restored bedrooms on the second floor of Ramsay House done by Milton Grigg. Credit: Ramsay MMS Collection, Special Collections, Alexandria Library

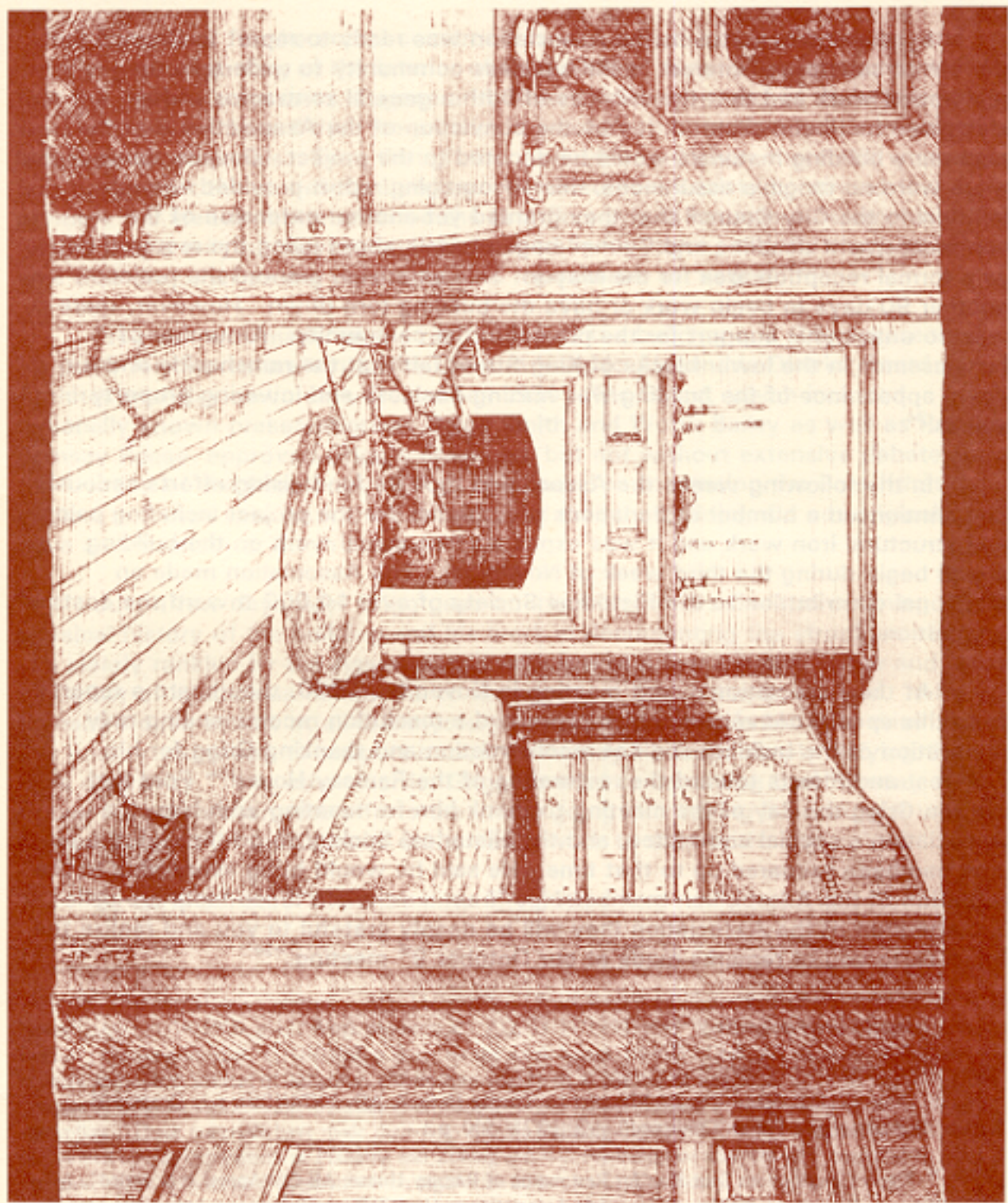


Illustration No. 7